

VZCZCXRO3926
OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK
DE RUEHMK #1637/01 2501548
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 071548Z SEP 06
FM AMEMBASSY MANAMA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5595
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RHMFISS/HQ USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHBVAKS/COMUSNAVCENT

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 001637

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/07/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BA](#) [POL](#) [HUMRIT](#) [REFORM](#)
SUBJECT: SHIA EDITOR DISCUSSES DEMOCRATIC REFORM/ELECTIONS
WITH AMBASSADOR

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reasons: 1.4 (B)(D)

1. (C) Summary. Prominent Shia Editor Mansour Al-Jamry told the Ambassador September 7 that the upcoming parliamentary elections, although flawed, would offer an opportunity for leading Shia opposition society Al-Wifaq to demonstrate that it can ably represent Shias and to build a psychological bridge to the King. He expected election irregularities, including padding of electoral rolls and manipulation of e-voting, but predicted this would have marginal impact on the performance of Al-Wifaq, which should emerge as the largest parliamentary bloc with about 14 seats. Al-Jamry was critical of U.S. policy towards the region, most notably regarding Lebanon and the Palestinians, and said that with our credibility low, any public criticism of the Government of Bahrain by the USG because of the departure of NDI would backfire. End summary.

2, (C) The Ambassador met September 7 with Mansour Al-Jamry, Editor-in-Chief of Al-Wasat, a leading Bahraini newspaper which reflects Shia opinion/concerns in the country. Al-Jamry is the son of a leading Shia opposition figure in the 1970s, and lived in exile in London for many years before returning to Bahrain five years ago when the King introduced his reform movement in Bahrain and invited back exiled opposition figures. The meeting took place on the fourth anniversary of the initial publication of Al-Wasat.

13. (C) The Ambassador opened the discussion by congratulating Al-Jamry on the fourth anniversary of Al-Wasat, and the positive contribution that his newspaper has made to the development of freedom of the press in Bahrain. In that context, the Ambassador asked for his assessment of the current situation in Bahrain and the region. Al-Jamry, a strong supporter of U.S. democratic reform programming in Bahrain who wrote several sharply critical editorials about U.S. policy during the Lebanon war, launched into a lengthy critique of U.S. policy towards the Middle East, in particular Israel/Palestine and Lebanon. He said we should have recognized that there were moderate elements within Hamas and Hizbollah, and should have reached out to them. Nasrallah, he said, is someone we could have dealt with, and he is not religiously extreme. He said that the attack on Lebanon was not looked at in the Gulf in Shia-Sunni terms, but rather as an attack on Moslems. Any attack on Iran, he added, would be viewed the same way. Saudi Arabia's reputation in the region has suffered because of its initial statement on Lebanon criticizing Hizbollah.

14. (C) Domestically, Al-Jamry said he was resigned to a halt in the democratic reform process in Bahrain for now, and that the best-case prognosis was no further backsliding. He said the upcoming elections would be flawed, although still a positive development. He expressed concern that the government was making efforts to influence the outcome -- both by padding voter rolls through naturalization and

issuance of passports to Saudis who do not live in Bahrain (an accusation made before the last parliamentary elections in 2002), and -- as necessary -- through manipulation of e-voting. He said that these moves are not intended to change markedly the number of seats leading opposition society Al-Wifaq will win. At worst, they may lose a couple of seats, but should take about 14, making Al-Wifaq the largest bloc in the National Assembly (that estimate is in line with most predictions). He said the government's attentions are not focused on Shia districts, but rather on Sunni or mixed areas, where it hopes to have some influence on who will win. He expected the election to proceed as planned, with one wildcard a flare-up over the Iran nuclear issue, which could have unknown consequences in Bahrain.

15. (C) Al-Jamry said that hard-line Sunnis are afraid of a resurgent Shia community as a result of the election. He said that the King at this point did not share this apprehension, but was under considerable pressure from the hard-line Sunnis. Recent reports of political naturalizations and warnings about Shia land purchases in traditionally Sunni neighborhoods in Muharraq are a reflection of hard-line Sunni maneuverings before the election.

16. (C) Despite some of the negative atmospherics in the run-up to the election, Al-Jamry thought that the post-election period offered some important opportunities. As the largest bloc in the parliament, Al-Wifaq will face challenges. Its first challenge will be to demonstrate to the Shia people that it is capable of serving their interests and representing them well. This will be difficult, because Al-Wifaq is a large umbrella group comprised of a wide range of people and factions from clerics to business people to political hardliners. But he recalled that his father had

MANAMA 00001637 002 OF 002

gained considerable stature in the community when he was elected as an MP in the 1970s, and Al-Wifaq MPs will now have a similar opportunity. Al-Wifaq's second challenge will be to build a psychological bridge to the King. There is so much distrust between Sunnis and Shia in Bahrain these days, he lamented. Al-Wifaq will have an opportunity to break some of that down. But the King, he added, will also have a responsibility to resist anti-Shia pressures among some Sunnis, and try to move forward.

17. (C) The Ambassador raised the issue of NDI, our strong disappointment that it was forced to stop programming in Bahrain, and our desire to find a way to bring it back. Al-Jamry said that prospects for an early return were dim, as the government would not want NDI in the country around the election as it would surely pick up any irregularities. In terms of what the USG could do, he advised against making any critical statement, as that would backfire. The U.S., he said, has low credibility here now. In looking at the U.S., people first think of Lebanon, and then Iran. Democracy comes after that.

Visit Embassy Manama's Classified Website:

<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/manama/>

MONROE